

Allendale County Recovers From Courthouse Fire

By W. Stuart Morgan III

Fire destroyed Allendale County's courthouse on May 18th, displacing most county employees and crippling county government ...

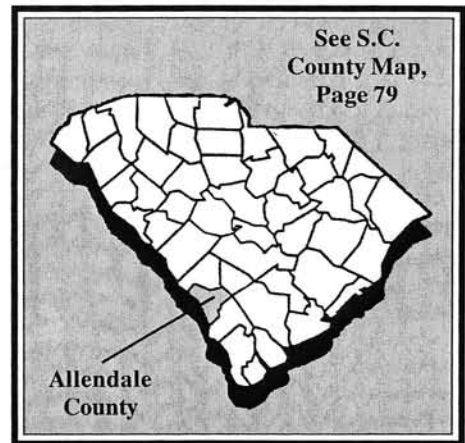
But not for long.

Within days, Allendale County government was offering limited services out of a nearby gymnasium and armory. Several weeks later, the 35 county employees displaced by the courthouse

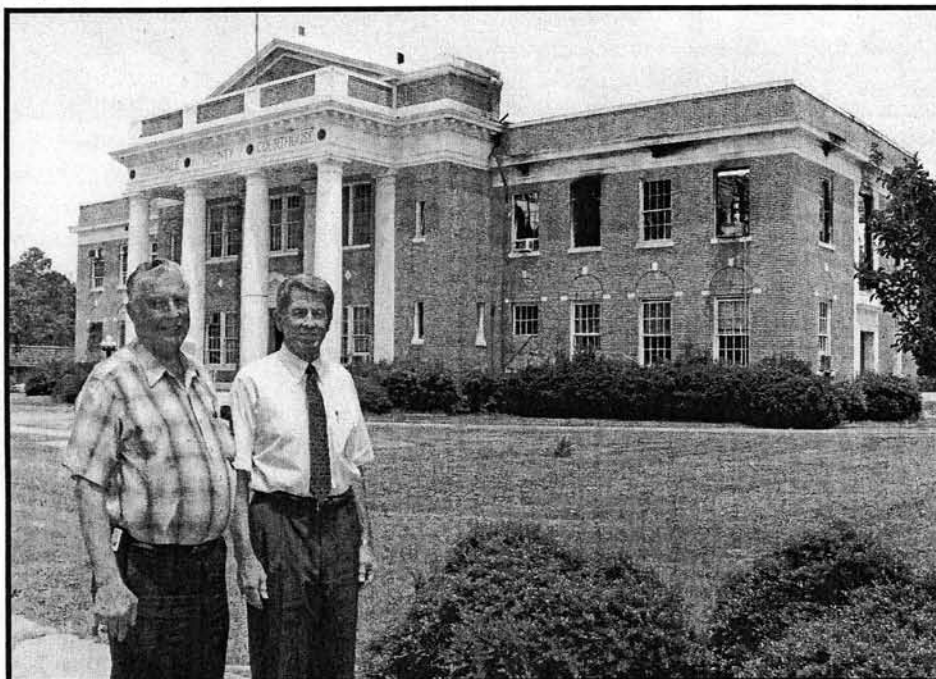
fire were setting-up new offices about a block away.

"The fire was a travesty to a beautiful old building," said H.W. "Billy" Priester, Allendale County Administrator.

Built in 1922, Allendale County Courthouse was one of the county's



During the courthouse fire (Photo by Mickey Smith)



Showing the courthouse after the fire are (l to r) Gene Smith, Allendale County Public Works Director, and H.W. "Billy" Priester, Allendale County Administrator.

most historically significant buildings.

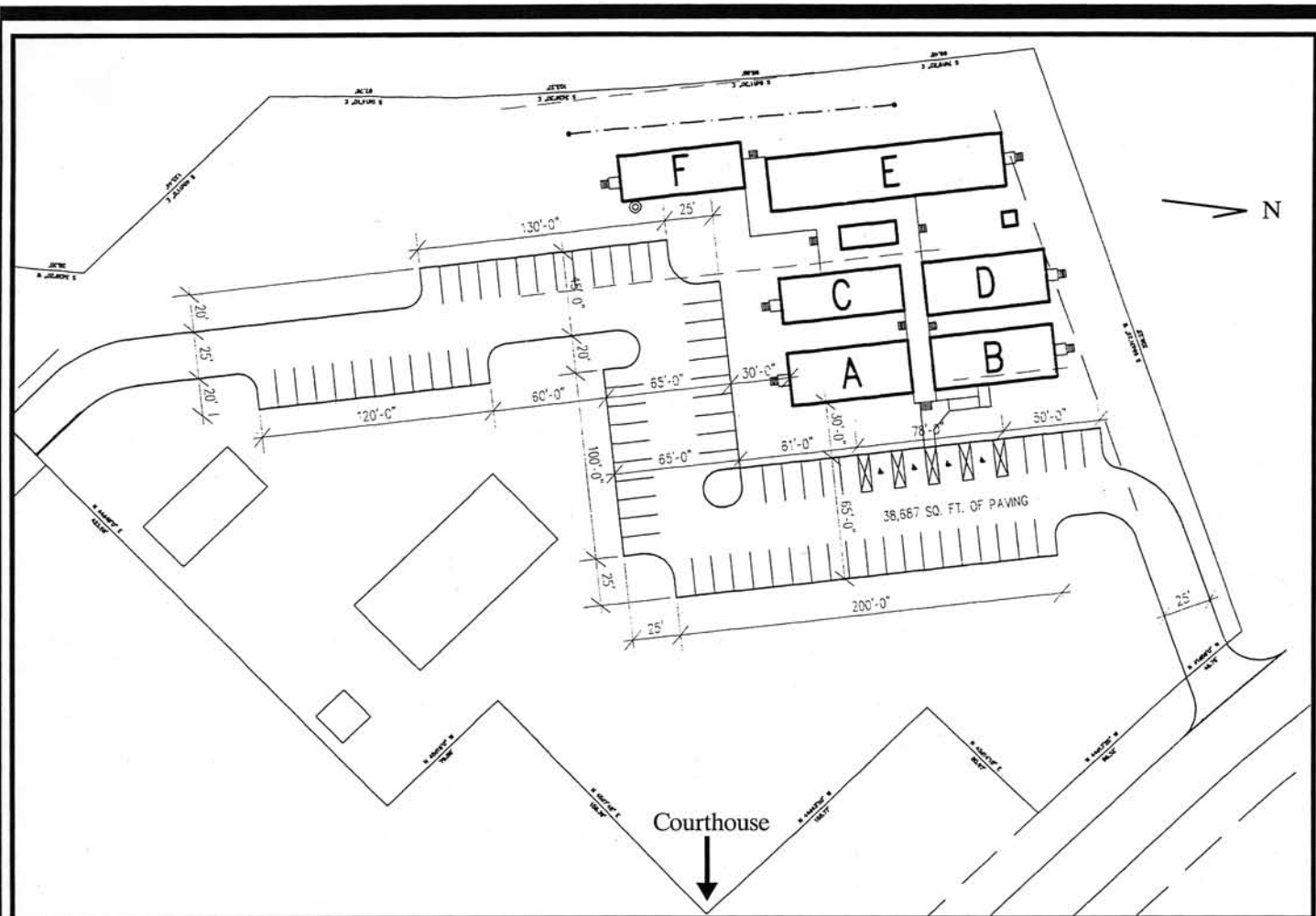
"We just kind of did the best we could after the fire to put our county back in business," Priester said. "It was a wonderful cooperative effort on the part of everyone involved."

The Fire. The fire, ruled arson by the S.C. Law Enforcement Division (SLED), began around 2 A.M. in the courthouse's East ground floor doorway underneath the stairwell.

With the stairwell acting as a chimney, the fire spread quickly upstairs from that end of the building through the Judge's Chambers, the Probation Office, the courtroom and through the roof to the West end.

Savannah River Site (SRS) in neighboring Aiken County, and firefighters from neighboring Bamberg, Barnwell and Hampton counties helped Allendale County firefighters extinguish the fire by 7 A.M. The Town of Denmark in Bamberg County also dispatched a much-needed ladder truck to help firefighters reach the courthouse roof.

Photo by Stuart Morgan



The blaze destroyed the two-story building, but estimated damages—expected to run as high as \$3 million—are still being assessed.

Saving County Records. The fire destroyed county books on the upper floor but none that were valuable.

“The architect, who designed and built the courthouse,” Priester explained, “constructed three vaults on the lower level that protected county records there from fire, smoke and heat.”

Still, water—used to extinguish the blaze—poured down into the offices below on the lower floor, soaking equipment and some county records that had been left on office counter tops.

Several hours after the fire, county officials also found other county records, stored in the basement, under about three feet
(Continued on next page)



Allendale County has created temporary county offices near the courthouse by setting-up these seven modular units (See rendering above). (Photo by Stuart Morgan)

of water. Officials of the S.C. Archives & History Center examined those records and discovered that they were valuable.

After all county records (including those in the basement) were moved to the USC-Salkehatchie Gymnasium and U.S. National Guard Armory nearby, Archives & History officials taught county officials how to dry and preserve them. They also sent some records to Atlanta for freeze-drying and preservation.

Archives & History continues to send officials to Allendale periodically to ensure proper steps are being taken to preserve the records.

This, however, is a story in itself. (See story, page 58)

Getting Back in Business.

Priester said his county "was pretty



H.W. "Billy" Priester

much out of business for awhile."

His office, located in the county's administration building about two blocks down the street from the courthouse, was untouched by the fire.

But he still had to struggle to run the county because he did not have any county data or books to work with, and most county employees had no place to work. So, getting the county back in business was a major challenge.

"None of our computers worked after the fire because they had to be cleaned and dried first," Priester said. "Data also had to be recovered from the computers."

Immediately after the fire, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) Office and SRS had quickly dis-

Photo by Stuart Morgan

Public Works Director Credited for Getting County Up and Running Again

Allendale County Administrator Billy Priester credited everyone* who helped his county after the courthouse fire.

But he singled-out Gene Smith, Allendale County's public works director, and the county's Public Works Department for their work.

"Mr. Smith was the person responsible for getting the county up and running again during the two-month period following the courthouse fire," Priester said. "Responsible for the county's roads and bridges, sanitation and water department, buildings and grounds, he continued to run his department after the fire. At the same time, he was also the person who went out, supervised and coordinated our county's efforts to assemble and relocate its office space."

"Our public works department employees couldn't have been more wonderful," Priester said. "After the fire—in 95 to 102 degree temperatures—they came in and worked after hours and entered the courthouse trying to save whatever they could save. They also tried their best to help us put things back together."

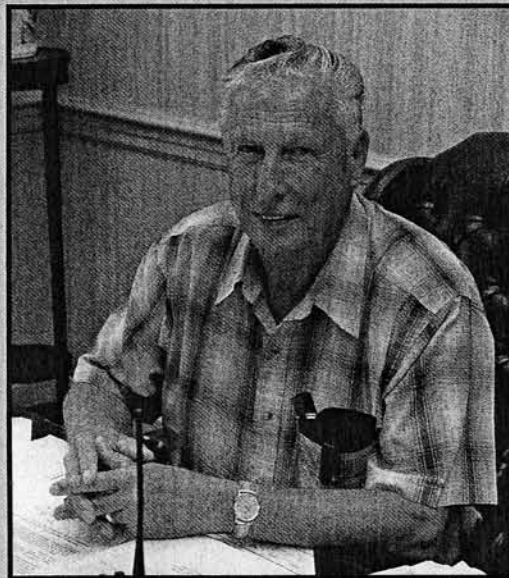
According to Smith, putting county government back in operation after the fire was especially difficult considering

Allendale County officials had never dealt with such a major problem before.

"Still," Smith said, "I think that we came through it because of the great support that we got from our county employees, county council and other people involved. It was a won-

derful cooperative effort from everybody." Smith said the modular units, provided by DOE, made his job a lot easier. "I don't know where we would have put our county employees if DOE hadn't responded," he added.

Smith, a retired engineer, began working for Allendale County in 1993.



Gene Smith

Photo by Stuart Morgan

**Priester also credited many others, including: Allendale County Council, led by Council Chairman J.W. Wall, Jr.; Joan Cooper, County Architect; Mickey Smith, County EMS Director; for his supervision of the county fire departments and EMS personnel who supported the firemen as they put-out the fire; fire and EMS departments from surrounding counties; SRS; DOE; S.C. Archives & History Center;*

SLED; the S.C. Department of Corrections, which sent prisoners to help move records; USC-Salkehatchie Gymnasium; and U.S. National Guard Armory.

patched personnel to Allendale to determine exactly what the county needed.

Finding that the county desperately needed offices, SRS donated seven modular units (*See page 55*). DOE also sent desks, chairs, tables and whatever else the county needed to furnish the units.

The county then paid \$134,000 to equip and set-up the units for office use on two acres of county-owned land just southwest of the courthouse.

The treasurer's office, which began collecting some taxes and handing out receipts by hand within 10 days after the fire, was one of the first county offices to begin offering services again. Other county offices began offering some limited services, too, as records were recovered from the gymnasium and armory.

Soon, all county data was recovered from the computers that were soaked when the courthouse fire was extinguished. Once county offices were set-up in the modular units, they were reconnected and linked via computers as well.

Finally, by July 1st, the county was up and running again!

Priester singled-out Gene Smith, Allendale County Public Works Director, and the county's Public Works Department for their work between the fire and the time county government began operating again.

He also singled out SRS and DOE.

"I can't say enough about SRS and DOE," Priester said. "Once they understood our situation, they just cooperated with us 100 percent."

Plans for the Courthouse.

Allendale County had considered renovating the courthouse—including its historic courtroom—and adding a wing to the structure to create more office space before the fire.

In fact, the county had hired an architect less than a year ago to conduct a needs assessment of the building.

The fire didn't necessarily nix the county's plans.

"The fire," Priester explained, "just gave us an opportunity to take another look at what we need and options that are not tied around the courtroom."

The county had insured the courthouse for \$1,266,000 and has \$800,000 in its capital reserve fund that it can use. A structural engineer has also determined that the building—now a shell—could be saved.

Yet, after soliciting input from citizens, the county hasn't decided whether it will: 1) Restore the courthouse to its previous condition, 2) Keep the courthouse's outer shell and renovate the interior and redesign the roof and add a courtroom behind the existing building, or 3) Demolish the courthouse and build a new one.

Priester said, at this point, he's only sure about a couple of things.

"The first thing I've learned is that you need to appreciate what you have, try to maintain and preserve it, and be careful," Priester said. "The second thing I've learned is that you need not think that anything is beyond destruction."

"Fires happen," he added. "And I never thought I'd see this happen to our courthouse in my lifetime."



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